



Hunter, Alberta (1895-1984)

by Carla Williams

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Alberta Hunter performing "Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out." Film still from a youtube video that can be found [here](#).

Blues singer, lyricist, and actress Alberta Hunter, a distinctive stylist and one of the top recording artists in the 1920s and 1930s, experienced a dramatic comeback in her old age.

Alberta Hunter was destined to become a legend. Born on April 1, 1895 in Memphis, Tennessee, where she was reared, Hunter left home at age fifteen for Chicago, where, lying about her age, she launched her singing career in the city's nascent saloon and club scene, performing first with King Oliver's legendary Creole Jazz Band.

Possessed of abundant talent and stage presence, Hunter rose quickly to become one of the city's leading attractions in the 1910s and 1920s. Noted for singing the blues over troubled love affairs, she also wrote some of her own material, including "Down Hearted Blues."

Buoyed by her success in the city that had become the premier center for blues entertainers, Hunter began making recordings in 1921. She made more than 100 recordings for numerous labels, occasionally using pseudonyms to record while under contract with rival companies. Among her best known recordings are those of "Taint Nobody's Business If I Do" and "Aggravatin' Papa."

Having been molested as a child, in disturbing incidents that she would recall later in life, Hunter was largely disdainful of men, particularly those who would control and manipulate her.

In part because she was fiercely independent, rumors began to circulate regarding Hunter's sexuality. In 1919, perhaps in part to quell these stories, Hunter married Willard Townsend. However, the couple never slept together. After the wedding they moved in with Hunter's mother, Miss Laura, and Hunter slept with her instead. But even this degree of marriage was not for her, and Hunter left two months later and obtained a divorce in 1923.

In the days of Prohibition, almost anything went, and in the notorious "buffet flats," where many of the saloon singers also entertained, homosexuality was, if not fully accepted, at least tolerated and acknowledged. Although Hunter never discussed her lesbianism, she also did not keep her relationships hidden.

During her long-term relationship with Lottie Tyler, they shared apartments in New York and traveled to Europe together. Friends later recalled their relationship as volatile. Hunter was notoriously tight with money, while Lottie was something of a dilettante without much income of her own. Eventually, Lottie fell in love with another woman.

Hunter also maintained serious flirtations with men but none developed into a lasting relationship. During her later years, rather than pursue the company of either men or women, Hunter focused her attention on caring for Miss Laura.

While her love affairs failed to develop, however, Hunter's remarkable career flourished from the 1920s through the 1940s. Her recordings and her performances throughout the United States on the black vaudeville circuit and the T.O.B.A. (Theater Owner's Booking Association) made her famous.

Like other African-American entertainers, Hunter also traveled to Europe, where racism was less oppressive. She performed in London, Paris, Amsterdam, and Copenhagen. In 1928 she was featured opposite Paul Robeson in the London production of *Showboat*. Hunter credited herself as the "first colored girl singing in languages."

During World War II she led several USO companies on missions to entertain American troops. She even gave a command performance for General Eisenhower at war's end.

By the 1950s, however, the bookings had dried up and the ever-pragmatic, humanitarian-minded Hunter sought a new career. She conned her way into a New York hospital's training program for licensed practical nurses by subtracting a dozen years from her age.

Hunter devoted tireless energy to her new profession, which she vigorously pursued for twenty years. No one ever suspected that she had been a star, and she was not one to recall those days. She broke her vow not to perform only once during her tenure as a nurse, in 1961, to rerecord her signature composition, "Down Hearted Blues," with pianist Lovie Austin, who wrote the music.

Hunter was forced to retire from nursing in 1977; the hospital believed she had reached the mandatory retirement age of seventy (she was actually eighty-two). That same year the indefatigable Hunter embarked upon a remarkable return to performing.

Her voice deepened and enriched by the intervening years, she proved a sensation. She performed regularly at The Cookery in Greenwich Village and was a hit with audiences worldwide. A tiny woman swinging large dangling earrings that seemed to weigh more than she did, Hunter became the toast of the talk-show circuit as well. She was full of energy, life, and humor.

During the last six years of her life she recorded two new albums and oversaw the re-release of her older material.

She died on October 17, 1984, aged 89.

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